

Review of 1994 SRUTI Concerts

Charumathy Ramachandran exhibits Graha Bhedam
April 23, 1994

Rasikan

Graha Bhedam (modal shift of tonic) is a difficult feat to perform in S.Indian music. It is accomplished as follows:

While singing a ragam, shift the aadhara sruti (basic tonic) to a different swaram in the scale of the ragam and sing some or all the swarams of the ragam. One will get the impression of hearing a different ragam. Mohana ragam exemplifies this modal shift of tonic. By shifting the tonic to Ri, Ga, Pa, Dha, we can hear Madhyamavathy, Hindolam, Suddha Saveri and Suddha Dhanyasi respectively. Charumathy Ramachandran brought this technical feature in her Sruti concert. She was accompanied by M.S. Anantharaman on the violin and by Skanda Prasad on the mridangam.

A senior disciple of the late Sangita Kalanidhi M.L. Vasanthakumari, Charumathy is well known for her cerebral approach to S. Indian music. Her concert contained many other technical features, as we shall see later.

Right off the bat, one could sense that the concert was going to be different. Charumathy started the concert with a varnam, not a customary tana varnam but a pada varnam, Maye Malayadhwaja of Muthiah Bhagavathar. [Pada varanas are often performed in dance programs.] After a short Hamsadhwani piece of Koteeswara Iyer, she took up Pantuvarali for some elaboration followed by Dikshitar's Ramanadham bhajeham.

Charumathy then sang a short Purandara dasa piece, Katheerava, in Reetigowla. She followed it up with a detailed alapana in Mohanam prior to rendering Nanu Palimpa, the ever great kriti of Thyagaraja. It was during the swara prastara for this kriti that Charumathy exhibited the graha Bhedam referred to earlier. To really appreciate the significance of this technique, the violinist should play and hold the sruti to which the musician has shifted. Unfortunately, Anantharaman failed to do so, with the result the graha bhedam did not come off as it should have. Charumathy, however, valiantly tried to accomplish the feat more than once in different speeds! The tani avartanam by Skanda Prasad which followed was short and sweet.

Charumathy then sang Muthiah Bhagavathar's popular kriti in Suddha Dhanyasi, Himagiri tanaye. She followed it up with Om Namō Narayana, a composition of Ambujam Krishna.

The music for this piece was set by Charumathy herself in a rare raga, Kamaranjani.

After a crisp Niravadi, Thyagaraja's kriti in Ravichandrika, Charumathy took up Todi for RTP. She exhibited her innovativeness and technical brilliance by rendering the Adi tala Pallavi in two gatis, the laghu in tisra ghati (3 swarams to a beat) and the dhrutam in chatusra gati (4 swarams to a beat). This feat elicited appreciative response from the audience.

In the post Pallavi segment, Charumathy continued to exhibit her innovativeness by rendering a tarana in Brindavan Saranga, composed by herself. [Tarana is heard primarily in N. Indian music; Thillana is a S. Indian adaptation.]

Although the concert was well thought out and bristled with technical details, the concert itself never rose to a level high enough to enthuse the audience. A good part of the blame for this must go to Anantharaman whose performance was well below par. His failure to support Charumathy in her graha bhedam is inexplicable and inexcusable. Skanda Prasad, a young mridanga vidwan, gave adequate support. Charumathy deserves better accompaniments.

Rasikan is devoted admirer and connoisseur of Carnatic Music and was one of the founding members of SRUTI. He also served as the President of SRUTI for several years.